Taji's Quest in Melville's Mardi: A Psychological Allegory in the Mythic Mode

Juliec M. Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Taji's Quest in Melville's Mardi: A Psychological Allegory in the Mythic Mode

by JULIE M. JOHNSON

At the conclusion of Herman Melville's novel, Mardi, the hero rejects the safety of the allegorical island of Serenia, and abandoned as a "madman" by his once-faithful companions, heads his boat toward the open sea in futile pursuit of his elusive beloved, pursued in turn by the three "avengers"—"pursuers and pursued . . . over an endless sea." This act, which is accompanied by the proclamation, "I am my own soul's emperor, and my first act is abdication," is perceived by his companions as the "last, last crime," and is clearly suicidal. Taji's decision to pursue Yillah, and, by fleeing Serenia, to abdicate his own soul, has created a problem for the critics, who are divided in their assessment of whether his decision is heroic or demonic or simply foolish. Barbara Blansett thinks this ending depicts Taji as "an undaunted, noble hero, valiantly sailing off on his lone journey into the unknown in pursuit of the absolute ideal." Nathalia Wright also praises his action, asserting that it is a rejection of the "demon principle" represented by the dark temptress, Hautia, who rules over Serenia. At the other extreme, James E. Miller maintains that "in his refusal to compromise and in his perseverance in the path of destruction and death, Taji becomes committed to an evil greater than any he has observed in Mardi." In the same vein, Milton Stern claims, in The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville, that Taji's self-proclaimed abdication of his own soul is "the complete denial of life itself, the unforgivable sin." Between these polar positions rest critics, like Bruce Franklin, who think Taji is both "damned" and "glorious," and others, like Martin Pops, who believe that Taji's persistence, "however heroic, is also foolish, and, more to the point, sinful, escapist, and cowardly—a flight from justice, society and sex." Arguing deterministically, Charles Fiedelson states, in Symbolism and American Literature, that Taji's refusal to accept Hautia's island of Serenia, as it represents human limitation, and his
determination to continue his quest for Yillah are not his “fault” but simply his “predicament” as a human being. Finally, considering the action from a different perspective, Charles Haberstroh, Jr., says that Yillah is a Freudian projection of Taji-Melville’s mind, born out of Melville’s need to avoid the sense of personal powerlessness and the fear of physicality produced by his recent marriage, and therefore that Taji’s action simply mirrors Melville’s own desire to escape reality. All of these arguments have validity, and although some of them appear to be mutually exclusive, their resolution can be found in an archetypal approach to the novel. Examining Mardi in the contexts of psychology and mythology, the ambiguity of the ending can be seen to arise from the discrepancy between Taji’s conscious motivation, which is to continue his search for Yillah, and his subconscious motivation, which is to flee the Great Mother as embodied in Hautia.

There are several quests in Mardi, and though Taji’s quest is central, it is not singular. Much of Melville’s fiction focuses upon the particular quests of his major characters. Merlin Bowen claims that all of Melville’s questers are seeking to define the “unknown Self,” and because of the inevitable ambiguity of the external world, that Self can be perceived only by looking inward. Characteristically, Melville depicts this inward quest in Mardi by externalizing it in the manner of allegory: the internal state of the quester is projected upon persons and objects, creating an external metaphoric structure. In the case of Taji’s quest, the
structure is that of a psychological allegory in the mythic mode, a structure into which Erich Neumann’s work in depth psychology, and Joseph Campbell’s work in mythology, offer particularly clear windows.

Carl Jung separated himself from the Freudian school on the basis of his conviction that dream symbols are not simply figments of the personal unconscious, but participate in the “collective” or “transpersonal” unconscious, and are therefore personal manifestations of universal “archetypes.” In addition, Jung argued that in order to achieve the completely integrated state of the mature “Self,” each individual must progress through the archetypal stages from unconsciousness to full consciousness, a developmental progression he referred to as “the process of individuation.” Whereas Jung’s primary interest was in analyzing the archetypes as they manifested themselves in the individual, his student, Erich Neumann, became absorbed by the systematic progression of these archetypes. Neumann defined three “mythological stages in the evolution of consciousness.” In the first stage, that of “Creation,” the Self is unconscious. The second stage, that of “the Hero,” begins with the first weak struggles against the Uroboros, includes the slaying of the Great Father, and concludes with the killing of the Great Mother. Provided this stage is completed, the Hero enters the final, or “transformation” stage, in which he seizes the reward of fully attained Selfhood, a reward usually embodied by Maiden or Treasure.

There is a parallel between the depth psychologists’ understanding of the process by which consciousness develops out of unconsciousness in the individual, and the understanding of cultural anthropologists and mythologists of that same process as it is manifested in ritual and myth. The stages in “the myth of the hero,” as delineated by Joseph Campbell, replicate Neumann’s stages in the evolution of consciousness. Each is finally a metaphor for the other. Literature in the mythic mode embodies this personal-cultural-mythic process, and the quest literature of all times and all cultures therefore participates in this mode.

Taji’s quest for the Self is not revealed through dream symbols, although he thinks of the islands he visits as being “invested with all the charms of dreamland” (ch. 1), and the psychic figures in his quest are all, at one time or another, referred to as “phantoms” or “spectres.” Instead, we observe the process through his projection of the archetypal forces influencing him upon people and objects around him. The process begins with the mythic stage which Campbell calls “separation” and Neumann calls “Creation.” The narrator, who has not yet assumed

7. See, for example, Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), passim.
the name Taji, is aboard the whaler, *Arcturion*, which is a symbolic manifestation of the Uroboros—the androgynous World Parent—described by Neumann as "anything big and embracing which contains, surrounds, enwraps, shelters, preserves, and nourishes anything small." The Uroboros, or Great Round, is the Womb of creation, the Great Mother and Great Father in one form. It is the force which creates and sustains. At the same time, the Uroboros is also the Tomb of creation, for it is that which smothers and destroys the developing ego. Analogously, the *Arcturion* is its crew's protection against the ocean and the monsters of the deep, yet it also is the means whereby its crew is exposed to danger and death.

Like the toddler who no longer finds his parents the be-all and end-all, our narrator soon tires of his life aboard ship, which he finds mentally stultifying and "exceedingly dull." While in this frame of mind, he learns that the captain has decided to turn north in pursuit of the right whale, which is only found in the Arctic. To his boredom, then, is added his irritation that the length of the voyage will be extended, his dislike of cold weather, and his professional disdain of hunting a species of whale so easily caught (ch. 1). He finds himself, in short, in what he considers to be an "unbearable situation" (ch. 1), a condition which, according to Jung, always precipitates the process of individuation, and which Campbell describes as "the call" to separation. This situation provokes the narrator into jumping ship, an action which separates him from the dominance of the Uroboros. In psychological terms, this begins the process of individuation; in mythological terms, it begins the adventure of the Hero. This act also precipitates him, psychologically, into the next stage in his psychical relationship to the archetypal Female: the sexual stage of the Great Mother and her offspring, the anima, which is the projection of the feminine in the male.

In the meantime, our narrator has already undertaken what Campbell says is the next phase of the separation stage: he has acquired companions to aid and protect him in his adventures on the sea and through the Mardian islands. The first figure in this category is Jarl, called by Newton Arvin the "foster-father," who aids in the escape from the *Arcturion*, accompanies Taji through the early part of the Mardian journey, and is later martyred by the three avengers pursuing Taji. The second companion is Samoa, named for an island in the Navigator chain, who, like Jarl, finally dies at the hands of the avengers. As projections of Taji's psyche, Jarl and Samoa are figures who, in the archetypal situation of fraternal love, "complete the identity of self in the

---

9. Jung, *Integration*, p. 90; Campbell, p. 77. The masculine aspect of the Uroboros, the captain of the *Arcturion*, will neither help nor hinder Taji in his effort to leave the ship. He merely remarks, "you may leave her if you can" (ch. 1).
10. Arvin, p. 130.
friend.” Later, on Mardi, Taji will acquire other companions who will assume this fraternal role: Media, Babbalanja, Mohi and Yoomy.

Together with his protector-companions, Taji moves into the last phase of Campbell’s “separation” stage: he confronts the “threshold guardians” who represent darkness, danger, and the unknown. In the context of this novel, they are symbolized by the ocean in its malevolent aspects of paralyzing calm (chs. 2 & 16) and terrifying storm (ch. 36), and by the threatening sea creatures. The threshold guardians must be approached from a position of weakness—a small craft and no navigational equipment or chronometer—for they represent the unknown into which the still tiny ego projects itself in its struggle to rise out of the unconscious and attain a fully conscious Selfhood.

The confrontation with the threshold guardians precipitates the ego-hero into the second stage in his adventure, the stage which Campbell calls “initiation” and Neumann calls the “hero myth.” This is the time of heroic trials, a period when the hero goes on quests and, according to Neumann, the ego “struggles to free itself from the power of the unconscious and to hold its own against overwhelming odds.” This stage, which dominates the novel, is composed of the physical trials presented by the conflict with the ocean and the struggle with Aleema, the mental trials embodied in the philosophical-social-political aspects of the Mardian journey, and the spiritual trials inflicted on Taji by Hautia’s seductive flower-maidens, and the three avenging sons of Aleema. In the process of such trials, Neumann explains, it is necessary for the ego-hero to recognize the “duality” of his nature—that he participates in both the human and the divine. In Mardi, the narrator symbolically assumes the name of the solar demi-god, Taji, and it is in that persona, which, ironically, lends him power in an essentially powerless position, that he conducts his quest and endures his trials.

In the course of the quest the ego-hero must slay the Great Father, who symbolizes not the nurturing-smothering Great Mother, but the cultural values of civilization: tradition and religion. Taji’s slaying of the old priest, Aleema, constitutes this act. The consequences of the slaying are two-fold: Yillah escapes Aleema’s grasp, and the three sons of the slain priest begin their eternal pursuit of the murderer. The slay-

11. Baird, pp. 104, 207. The “puer aeternus,” like the “Shadow” and the “wise old man” who will be embodied as the sons of Aleema and Aleema respectively, are what Neumann calls “psychical authorities” (Mother, p. 38). They have their origins in the Uroboros, but are also creations, in part, of the personal unconscious.
12. Campbell, pp. 77-82.
14. The persona is described by Jung as a kind of ego-mask arising from the “complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society,... designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual” (Carl Jung, “The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious,” Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, trans. by R. F. C. Hull [New York: World, 1956], p. 203).
15. Neumann, Mother, pp. 170-91. Aleema represents “religion” in all its negative connotations according to Stern (pp. 119-26), and “secular Reality incarnate” according to Pops (p. 40).
ing of the Father, then, introduces two figures who function as projections of Taji's unconscious, the "anima" (Yillah) and the "Shadow" (the sons of Aleema).

The meeting with Yillah represents Campbell's next phase in the initiation process, the "meeting with the goddess"; and it is balanced shortly afterward in another phase by the meeting with the "woman as temptress," which is hinted at by the "incognito" of chapter 61, but more clearly symbolized in the three seductive flower-maidens who are differentiated manifestations of Hautia. Although Hautia does not appear until the last four chapters, she exists as a dynamic projection of Taji's unconscious from the moment of her appearance as the "incognito," when Taji sees her as "a spirit forever prying into my soul" (ch. 61).

These characters—the three avengers, the three seducers, Yillah, and Hautia—are dramatic projections of the most potent archetypes of Taji's quest: the Shadow, the dark and light aspects of the anima, and the Great Mother. However, archetypal symbols are rarely neat entities but, as Jung warned, tend to "contaminate" each other, with the anima and the Shadow being the most difficult to delineate. In Taji's psychological allegory, the three avenging sons of Aleema are the Shadow, and their appearance in every instance is accompanied by the appearance of the anima in its seductive aspect as the three flower-maidens. Both Shadow and anima have their origin in the Uroboros, but the Shadow is also a psychical projection of undesirable and therefore frightening components of the personal unconscious. The process of individuation requires a confrontation with the Shadow, or dark side of one's self: Although the individual can avoid confronting this manifestation of his own inner, unknown, and unattractive self so long as he projects it onto an active personality, he cannot achieve Selfhood without first accepting and resolving his identification with and fear of his Shadow. In Taji's case, the personal component of his Shadow is the guilt arising from his murder of Yillah's father, Aleema—a guilt projected in the fig-

16. Campbell, pp. 109, 120. The number three recurs obsessively in Mardi: 3 avengers, 3 seducers, 3 canoes, 3 holes in OhOh's block of wood, 3 tail feathers on the bird, etc. Ernst Cassirer argues that numerology, as a formal structural motif, is a "vehicle of religious signification" (Mythical Thought, trans. Ralph Manheim [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955], pp. 82-143). C. Kerényi discusses the numbers three and four in connection with the process of individuation, and asserts that three signifies incompletion, whereas fourness is the configuration of harmony ("Prolegomena," Essays on a Science of Mythology, trans. R. F. C. Hull, revised ed. [New York: Harper and Row, 1963], pp. 14-24).

17. Jung, Integration, p. 91. Mircea Eliade, in his study of religious symbolism, Images and Symbols, emphasizes that symbols, "by their very structure are multivalent. . . To translate an image into concrete terminology by restricting it to any one of its frames of reference is to do worse than mutilate it—it is to annihilate, to annul it as an instrument of cognition" (trans. Philip Mairet [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969], p. 15).

18. Jung, Integration, pp. 20, 69; Pops, pp. 17-18. William Sedgwick equates the avengers with "guilt, remorse, and a mortal need of expiation and atonement" (Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind [New York: Russell and Russell, 1962], p. 51). On the other hand, Blansett sees them as wholly positive projections of "conscience, responsibility, and obligation" (p. 218); and Tyrus Hillway maintains, in addition, that they represent "the religious faith of youth" (Herman Melville [New Haven: College and Univ. Press, 1963], p. 79).
The nature of Aleema's ghost and in the figures of Aleema's three avenging sons; the collective component of the Shadow is the universal male guilt over murdering the Great Father in order to attain the Great Mother—the archetypal sin of the Oedipus myth. Through the collective component of the Shadow, and the association of seducers and avengers (that is, of anima and Shadow), Hautia and Yillah are linked together.

Taji never comprehends the intimate relationship between Yillah and Hautia—the fair anima and the Great Mother—and this failure finally accounts for the unsuccessful termination of his quest. The archetypal relationship of Hautia to Yillah and the flower-maidens is the relationship of the Great Mother to her offspring, the anima, in its positive and negative aspects as the fair Yillah and the dark seducers. As the ego develops during the “initiation” stage of the individuation process, the ego begins to wrest the anima, in both its manifestations, from the Great Mother. The anima, which is the “transformative character” of the Feminine in the male, is that “dynamic element of the psyche,” according to Neumann, which urges the ego toward consciousness, individuation, and the achievement of spiritual and sexual maturity and unity in Selfhood. Going back to Campbell’s stages in the adventure of the hero, we find that a typical mythic analogue for the separation of anima from Great Mother is the dragon fight: The hero, having already endured many trials, comes at last to a confrontation with the dragon who guards the castle within which a fair and beautiful maiden is imprisoned. A great fight ensues, with the hero finally slaying the dragon and carrying off the maiden. In terms of Neumann’s paradigm of the evolution of consciousness, the dragon fight is a metaphor for the ego’s conscious confrontation with the female principle, the Great Mother, in order that he might overcome his fear of the female, who is “synonymous with the unconscious, the nonego, hence with darkness, nothingness, the void, the bottomless pit,” and so free himself to seize the anima.

Martin Pops believes that Melville’s heroes are always on a dual quest, for “the realization of soul” and for “sexual fulfillment.” Actually these are two aspects of one quest. The usual interpretation of Yillah is that she is a symbol for the asexual ideal. She is most generally perceived as a spiritual object—the symbol of “Truth,” or “paradise regained,” or the “unreflected happiness of youth,” or “man’s spiritual and intellectual aspirations.” From the text itself it appears that Yillah represents more to Taji than simply a spiritual ideal. Taji says that she is “the earthly semblance of that sweet vision that haunted my earliest

22. Arvin says she represents the “sexless happiness” which Melville himself sought (p. 130), and Fiedler calls her “an improbable Anglo-Saxon virgin” (p. 309). She represents the pure and innocent for
thoughts” (ch. 51), but the imagery which surrounds his first entrance into her tent is patently sexual, for he gains admittance by parting the “lacing” which covers its “round opening” with his “cutlass” (ch. 43). Later he creates a little bower of bliss in which he and Yillah live for a brief time alone together (chs. 62 & 64). Shortly afterward, Yillah disappears. Pops explains her disappearance as a consequence of her loss of virginity, and Stern argues that she must disappear because the Ideal, once made actual in the Real, can no longer exist as Ideal. Miller maintains that Yillah, as “innocence,” “cannot be found wherever evil exists; and since evil is universal, a condition of existence, Yillah can never be discovered—indeed does not exist.” However, another reason for her disappearance is implied in the text when Babbalanja says that she cannot be found either on the Golden Isle of cheap pleasure (ch. 166), nor on the Isle of Palms with its primordial scenes of innocent maidens “like Eves in Eden ere the Fall” (ch. 167). Therefore, because she represents neither lustful sexuality nor innocent asexuality, she must represent that mature and guiltless sexuality which is an aspect of the fully differentiated anima. Baird notes that during Melville’s voyages to the South Pacific he acquired the “autotype” of “innocent nakedness” which conjoined in his mind with the archetypes of his atavistic experience to form new “life-symbols,” one of which is Yillah. With Baird’s prior work in mind, Pops comments that for Taiji, Yillah represented the “perfect female”: “White-Western yet sexually unselfconscious,” for she was both innocent native and, by parentage, a child of his own color and culture.

If Yillah represents mature and guiltless sexuality, why does she disappear? Neumann and Jung have made clear that the anima does not simply evolve as a matter of course from the Great Mother, but must be violently wrested away in a symbolic act of matricide. Like the hero, who must slay the dragon to reach the maiden, the ego must slay the Great Mother to attain, and then maintain, full consciousness and the spiritual and sexual maturity which that brings. These analogous acts free the hero-ego to possess, both spiritually and physically, the sought-
for boon—damsel and Self. On the other hand, if the dragon survives, the maidens remains captured; and if the Great Mother survives, the ego cannot become one with its anima. In the latter case, when the detachment of the anima from the Great Mother is incomplete, a sexual relationship with the anima projection is a form of incest, and therefore guilt producing. Because Yillah is the guiltless, nonincestuous sexuality of the anima, she cannot remain with Taji unless he slays the Great Mother, for it is only through matricide that he can achieve a sexual relationship that is guilt-free.

From another perspective, in the same way that the Great Mother differentiates into the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother, the anima is more than simply the fair maiden who brings sex without guilt and serves as the positive force for ego transformation; she is also a negative force which excites and endangers the hero-ego, often through “the alluring and seductive figures of fatal enchantment.”

This aspect of the anima is represented in *Mardi* by the three seducers—the flower-maidens who are Hautia’s messengers. The relationship between the seducers and Yillah as two manifestations of the same archetype is clear from Mohi’s assertion that “the maidens of Hautia are all Yillahs held captive” (ch. 193). Like Yillah, the seducers are the anima which is not fully differentiated from the Great Mother. The danger of this dark aspect of the anima is that it tries to lure the ego back into incestuous relationship with the Great Mother, a self-annihilating act. At the same time, this negative anima-figure retains the transformative character of the positive anima-figure in that it warns as well as lures. The poet-companion, Yoomy, interprets for Taji the meaning of the messages the seducers bear, the essence of which is, “beware.”

Yillah and the flower-maidens, as the light and dark manifestations of the anima, are the offspring of the Great Mother, Hautia. The relationship between Yillah and Hautia has been examined at length by the critics, most of whom point out their common origins, and the fact that Hautia represents carnality. Others suggest, also rightly, that Hautia represents world experience, pride, spiritual death, and the demon principle. However, her additional role as the Great

---

26. Neumann, *Mother*, pp. 35, 80–81. The Sirens, for example, are mythic forms of this aspect of the anima.

27. The fair and the dark were both originally dwellers in Mardi, but the dark rose up and drove off the fair. The analogy to the Cain and Abel myth is obvious, and the use of dark and light is basically allegorical. However, the ambiguity which will mark *Moby-Dick* is suggested in that Hautia’s darkness is sensually alluring, and the fair Yillah is associated with death, both in the stillness of the tent and in Taji’s final act of “abdication.”

28. Arvin, pp. 95, 130; Bernard, p. 27; Blansett, p. 218; Fiedler, p. 309; and Humphrey, p. 19. Matthiessen maintains that Hautia represents “experience,” which includes both good and evil, the good being “mature passion” and the evil being lust (p. 348). Similarly, Carpenter argues that Taji’s sexual rejection of Hautia shows “an incapacity for mature [sexual] experience” (p. 257). It is my contention, however, that Hautia represents incestuous, and therefore guilt-ridden, sexuality.

29. Carpenter (p. 265) and Hillway (*Melville*, p. 79) think Hautia represents experience; Stern believes she represents pride (p. 129); Sedgwick defines her as “spiritual death” (p. 51); and Wright calls her the “demon principle” (p. 361).
Mother in Taji’s psychological allegory is apparent from the imagery which surrounds her: She lives in the wild and fertile Flozella, with its “womb-tomb sea caverns” and its watery depths;\(^{30}\) she is the voluptuously sensual enchantress who overpowers with intoxicants then consumes the “soul” of her “victims”; a monstrous “vipress,” she is also the “vortex that draws all in” to their deaths (chs. 192–95).\(^{31}\)

Hautia, as the Great Mother, is that aspect of the feminine archetype which seeks to possess the ego by submerging the conscious in the unconscious—here symbolized by the intoxicants she offers Taji, and the watery vortex into which he must dive to try to free Yillah. The anima must be rescued from Hautia’s grasp if Taji is to possess her, but he is not equal to the task. He dives into the water after a “gleaming form, . . . vaguely Yillah,” but he cannot reach her. He emerges, his “spirit’s phantom’s phantom” (ch. 195), another “spectre” like those of his fantasies. The anima remains bound to the Great Mother. As a hero, he has failed to slay the metaphorical dragon; as ego, he has failed to attain the fully conscious, fully individuated or transformed Self. Taji’s process of individuation ends abortively. Although he does not realize it, he cannot now attain the boon and move into that final stage which Campbell refers to as the “return” of the hero, and Neumann calls “transformation.”\(^{32}\) This failure is attributable, finally, to Taji’s inability to confront and overpower both his Shadow and the Great Mother. His “last, last crime,” as Yoomy calls it, is to flee from both.

Ironically, Taji flees Hautia for the sea, which is traditionally symbolic of the creative-destructive bivalence of the Uroboros. This act appears glorious, chiefly, I suspect, because of the rhetorical flourish with which it is accomplished, but also because Taji perceives his flight from Mardi and pursuit of the vanished Yillah as heroic, rather than as the futile act of the defeated hero-ego which it is. Taji dashes for the raging ocean, pursuing the unattainable, pursued by his Shadow, the sons of Aleema. However glorious his impetuous behavior may appear, it is the ultimate act of the ego’s destruction, for Taji leaves the conscious world of land and friends to return to the Uroboric womb of the unconscious, as symbolized by the “hand omnipotent” of the tide racing oceanward (ch. 195). The anima is absorbed into the Great Mother, and Taji commits himself once again to the Uroboros.

As a psychological allegory in the mythic mode, Taji’s quest is the quest of both mythic hero and individual ego, for it participates in, and recapitulates, aspects of the archetypal quest of the collective uncon-
scious of the race. The failure of his quest is both the failure of Taji as hero to become one with Yillah and the failure of Taji as ego to achieve Selfhood and save his own soul. If Taji were consciously aware that his flight were regressive and doomed, that flight from Serenia would be, as some critics have maintained, escapist, life-denying, and even sinful. However, being unaware of his failure, he, like many readers and critics, perceives his action as heroic and his gesture as defiant. Any reading of the ending of *Mardi* finally depends, therefore, on whether we see Taji as he sees himself, or if we view his actions in the light of mythology and depth psychology.

*Georgia Institute of Technology*  
Atlanta